

Dr. Fred Putnam, Psalms, Session 4 of 4, Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide Quiz, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Putnam, Psalms, Session 4 of 4, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

Dr. Putnam's lecture explores how to approach difficult passages in the Psalms, specifically imprecatory Psalms and the use of imagery. He suggests viewing prayers for the destruction of enemies as a recognition of profound evil and appeals to God's justice, not personal vengeance. **The lecture emphasizes that underlying specific metaphors are foundational metaphors that provide deeper meaning, using the example of God as a "safe place."** Putnam illustrates this by analyzing Psalm 1, discussing how its structure and language reveal the metaphor of life as a journey and people as plants. **He advocates for patient, reflective reading of scripture, suggesting that appreciating the beauty of the text leads to a deeper understanding of its message.** The lecture concludes by discussing how poetry can help one understand the beauty and depth of scripture.

2. 13 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Putnam, Session 4 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Old Testament → Psalms & Wisdom → Psalms).



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3. Briefing Document: Putnam, Psalms, Session 4 of 4

Okay, here is a briefing document summarizing the main themes and important ideas from Dr. Putnam's lecture on the Psalms, along with relevant quotes.

Briefing Document: Dr. Fred Putnam on the Psalms (Lecture 4)

Main Themes:

- **Dealing with Imprecatory Psalms:** Addressing the problematic nature of psalms that call for vengeance and destruction of enemies.
- **Understanding Imagery and Metaphor:** Exploring the use of metaphors in Psalms to grasp abstract concepts about God and humanity.
- **Close Reading of Psalm 1:** Applying the principles of close reading and metaphor analysis to understand the meaning and structure of Psalm 1.
- **The Importance of Patience and Reflection:** Emphasizing the need for slow, thoughtful engagement with the text to appreciate its beauty and meaning.

Detailed Summary and Key Ideas:

1. Imprecatory Psalms:

- **The Problem:** Many Christians find it troubling to pray psalms that call for God to harm enemies. Putnam recounts an experience where a church skipped Psalm 137 due to its violent imagery: *"And I didn't think we should say, how blessed will be the one who seizes and dashes your little ones against the rock. Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit."*
- **Ubiquity of Vengeance in Scripture:** Putnam argues that prayers for vengeance are not unique to the Psalms, citing examples from the Gospels (Matthew 7:23), the writings of Paul, and Revelation (Revelation 6). *"I think it does show, first of all, that this idea of praying to God for vengeance or retribution on our enemies is biblically ubiquitous."*
- **Taking Evil Seriously:** C.S. Lewis's observation that the psalmists took evil more seriously than modern people is highlighted. Some evils demand destruction, not conversion. *"There are some evils for which we don't pray for a convert, we just pray for the destruction of the evil itself."*

- **Leaving Results with God:** The psalmists primarily ask God to act, not seeking personal power to harm their enemies. *"In none of these cases do... in all the other so-called imprecatory Psalms, the psalmist never asks for power for himself or for the ability to defeat his enemies or that God will help him do anything to them. He prays, yes, but then he just leaves the results with God."*
- **Covenantal Curse and Justice:** These prayers can be understood as appeals to God's covenantal justice, where those who falsely accuse others should receive the punishment they sought to inflict. *"So, he's just saying to the Lord, uphold your covenant. Interesting that he's not even trying to do that himself. He's not suing them. He's just saying, Lord, be faithful to your word."*
- **Appropriateness and Personal Temptation:** Putnam acknowledges the difficulty of praying these prayers due to the temptation of personal vengeance, but affirms their presence in the canon as a validation that they can be appropriate prayers. *"But they do seem to be appropriate simply because they're part of the canon...Instead, we say, at times, yes, God, it is appropriate to pray these things because only you can establish the justice that needs to be done."*

2. Understanding Imagery and Metaphor:

- **The Challenge of Abstraction:** Humans struggle to grasp abstract concepts like truth or goodness without concrete examples. *"Our minds find it challenging to grapple with things that can't, that are extra, outside our senses. That is, we can't touch. So how do we talk about truth? How do we talk about goodness?"*
- **God as a Safe Place: Foundational Metaphor:** Images like "crag," "fortress," "rock," and "shield" in Psalm 18:2 are not random but stem from a foundational metaphor: God is a safe place. *"We are able to use metaphors to understand things that we can't grasp physically or see because underneath our use of metaphors like rock and fortress and crag is a foundational metaphor that's a lot bigger and that encompasses all those...literary metaphors on the surface."*
- **Cultural Context:** Understanding the cultural significance of these images is important. Places of safety were crucial in biblical times due to constant threats. *"Well, the metaphor then is something we need to think about in terms not only of what the words mean but what it might have meant in their culture."*

- **Metaphor as a Window:** A metaphor is like a narrow window offering a limited view of a much larger reality (God). *"A metaphor is like a window, but unlike a normal window, you can't walk up to it and stick your head through and look all over the room. You can only look in from one position through a little narrow slot."*
- **Multiple Metaphors:** The Bible uses a vast array of metaphors for God. God as father is not the only image, he can also be seen as a safe place, and people relate to that image better at certain times in their lives. *"What if we said instead, okay, God as a father is only one window into who God is...How about this? God is a safe place. Well, those people who need a safe place, there are some people who need a safe place a lot more than they need a father."*
- **Other Metaphors: People are plants and life is a day:** Putnam notes that these combine together to give the picture that death is sleep, just as at the end of the day people go to sleep. *"If life is a day and at the end of the day we go to sleep, then maybe death is sleep."*

3. Close Reading of Psalm 1:

- **Life as a Journey:** Verse 1, concerning walking, standing, and sitting, is interpreted through the foundational metaphor of life as a journey. The "seat" in verse 1 should actually be translated "dwelling" to illustrate that life is a journey and where you end up depends on where you start. *"Maybe the metaphor is life is a journey and where you end up depends on where you start out."*
- **Structural Elements:** Verse 6 reinforces the "way" or path metaphor, creating an *inclusio* (framing device) for the psalm. *"For Yahweh knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked perishes."*
- **Shift in Focus:** Verse 2 shifts from what the blessed person *doesn't* do to what they *do* – delight in and meditate on the Law of the Lord. This shift is highlighted by grammatical discontinuities in the Hebrew text.
- **People as Plants (Tree):** Verse 3 uses the metaphor of people as plants, specifically a tree transplanted by streams of water. This illustrates the care and provision that lead to fruitfulness and lasting life. *"The person who doesn't do those things doesn't live the wrong life journey in verse one, but who meditates in Yahweh's law in teaching in verse two, has been transplanted into a place prepared for it so that it will grow so that it will be safe from the changes and vicissitudes of weather."*

- **Underlying Gardener Metaphor:** The image of the transplanted tree implies a deeper metaphor: God as a gardener. *"There's another foundational metaphor under there, and that is the Lord is a gardener...the image just underlies all."*
- **Grammatical Discontinuity:** The verb "prosper" in verse 3 is grammatically distinct in Hebrew, signaling a deliberate break and emphasizing the intentional contrast with the following verses about the wicked.

4. Patience and Reflection:

- **Importance of Slow Reading:** Putnam stresses the need for patience and thoughtful reflection in understanding the Bible, particularly poetry.
- **Engaging with the Text:** He suggests writing out poems, reading them aloud repeatedly, and noting connections to uncover the beauty and message.
- **The Beauty of the Text:** The beauty of the text is intertwined with the beauty of its message. *"And what will happen is that you will see that the beauty of the text is the beauty also of its message."*

Illustrative Poem:

- Putnam references William Butler Yeats' "The Second Coming" as an example of a poem that required extensive study and reflection to understand.

This briefing doc captures the key insights from Dr. Putnam's lecture, providing a framework for approaching and interpreting the Psalms with greater depth and understanding.

4. Study Guide: Putnam, Psalms, Session 4 of 4

The Poetic World of Psalms: A Study Guide

Quiz

Answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences each.

1. Why did the church secretary skip Psalm 137 during the church's responsible reading of the Psalter?
2. What are the two potential interpretations of imprecatory Psalms mentioned by Putnam?
3. According to Putnam, why is the presence of imprecations in the Psalms less problematic than the call for vengeance by souls in heaven in Revelation 6?
4. How does Deuteronomy 19 relate to the imprecations in the Psalms?
5. Explain the difference between literary and foundational metaphors.
6. What does the phrase "God is a safe place" mean in the context of foundational metaphors, and why is it significant?
7. Why does Putnam use the image of a skyscraper's foundation to explain foundational metaphors?
8. In Psalm 1, what is the foundational metaphor implied in the beginning, and how does the end of the Psalm reflect it?
9. How does Psalm 1 use discontinuity to contrast the righteous person with the wicked?
10. What is the significance of transplanting a tree by streams of water in Psalm 1?

Quiz Answer Key

1. The church secretary skipped Psalm 137 because it contains a disturbing verse about dashing little ones against a rock, which clashed with the Gloria Patri that followed the Psalm reading. She felt it was inappropriate to praise God after reading such a violent verse.
2. One interpretation suggests that imprecatory Psalms are sub-Christian expressions from an earlier age of spirituality. Another considers them reflections of a magical world where words are believed to have power to affect enemies.

3. The presence of imprecations by souls in heaven is more problematic because these souls are considered perfect. If perfect beings call for vengeance, it raises a more significant question about the nature of vengeance and its place in divine justice.
4. Deuteronomy 19 stipulates that if someone falsely accuses another of a crime, the accuser will receive the punishment fitting the crime. Putnam argues that the psalmists are appealing to this covenantal principle, asking God to uphold justice by punishing false accusers with the punishment they intended for the accused.
5. Literary metaphors are the surface-level figures of speech we see in texts, like "God is my rock." Foundational metaphors are deeper, underlying concepts that give meaning to the literary metaphors, such as "God is a safe place," which explains why God can be described as a rock, fortress, etc.
6. "God is a safe place" represents a foundational metaphor expressing God's protective and secure nature. This foundational metaphor allows for the use of various literary metaphors, like God being a rock or fortress, because they all point to this underlying idea of God's safety and refuge.
7. Putnam uses the image of a skyscraper's foundation to illustrate that foundational metaphors, like the deep and wide base of a skyscraper, are the essential and often invisible structures upon which all other specific metaphorical expressions are built. Without them, the structure of understanding crumbles.
8. In Psalm 1, the foundational metaphor is life as a journey, and the end of the Psalm reflects this by stating that "the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked perishes," emphasizing the concept of life as a path or course with different outcomes based on choices.
9. Psalm 1 uses discontinuity by switching from identical verbs in three clauses in verse one to no verb in verse two, and then uses a different form of the verb "delight" in the second half of verse two. This draws a distinction between the actions of the wicked and the righteous, highlighting the separation between their paths.
10. In Psalm 1, transplanting a tree by streams of water symbolizes the act of deliberately moving a person into a prepared and nurtured environment, symbolizing how meditating on the Law of the Lord moves a person into a safe place where they can thrive, grow, and bear fruit, protected from life's challenges.

Essay Questions

1. Discuss the challenges and potential benefits of incorporating imprecatory Psalms into Christian worship and personal prayer. How can these Psalms be interpreted in a way that aligns with Christian values of love and forgiveness?
2. Explain how the concept of foundational metaphors can enrich our understanding of biblical imagery. Provide examples from the Psalms and other biblical texts to illustrate your points.
3. Analyze the use of metaphors in Psalm 1, focusing on the shift from the "way" or "path" metaphor in verses 1 and 6 to the "tree" metaphor in verse 3. How do these metaphors contribute to the overall message of the Psalm?
4. Based on Putnam's lecture, discuss how cultural context and background can impact our understanding of the Psalms. Provide specific examples from the lecture to support your argument.
5. Critically evaluate Putnam's claim that slowing down and patiently reflecting on biblical poetry is essential for understanding God's message. How can readers cultivate this kind of patient engagement with the text?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Imprecatory Psalms:** Psalms that call for judgment, vengeance, or curses upon the psalmist's enemies.
- **Sub-Christian:** A term used (e.g., by C.S. Lewis) to describe elements in the Old Testament, like imprecatory Psalms, that some believe do not align with the higher moral standards of Christianity.
- **Canon:** The collection of books recognized as the inspired word of God and considered authoritative in religious communities.
- **Metaphor:** A figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable.
- **Literary Metaphor:** A specific, surface-level metaphorical expression found in a text (e.g., "God is my rock").
- **Foundational Metaphor:** A deeper, underlying conceptual structure that gives meaning to literary metaphors (e.g., "God is a safe place").
- **Chiasm:** A literary device in which words, phrases, or concepts are arranged in a mirrored or inverted order (e.g., A-B-C-B'-A').
- **Inclusio:** A literary device in which a similar word, phrase, or theme appears at the beginning and end of a text, creating a sense of closure or framing.
- **Discontinuity:** A deliberate break or shift in the text, often used to highlight a contrast or transition.
- **Semantic Value:** The meaning or significance of a word or phrase.
- **Predicate Participle:** A form of a verb that functions as an adjective or part of a verb phrase, describing a state or action.
- **Gyre:** (As used in the Yeats poem) A conical spiral or vortex, often used to symbolize historical cycles and the turning of ages.
- **Spiritus Mundi:** (As used in the Yeats poem) A Latin phrase meaning "spirit of the world," used to describe a collective unconscious or a universal storehouse of images and symbols.

5. FAQs on Putnam, Psalms, Session 4 of 4, Biblelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions about Understanding the Psalms

1. What should Christians do with Psalms that call for God to harm or destroy the Psalmist's enemies (imprecatory Psalms)?

There are several approaches to these Psalms. Some argue they are sub-Christian expressions of an earlier age. However, it's important to note that calls for divine vengeance are biblically widespread, even found in the words of Christ and the saints in heaven. C.S. Lewis argued they show that the biblical poets took evil more seriously than we often do. The psalmists never ask for personal power to defeat their enemies; they leave the results to God. These prayers are often appeals to God's justice and covenantal faithfulness. The psalmists typically protest their innocence and claim they are being attacked without cause. They are asking God to uphold his covenant and be true to His righteous character. When reading them, we should remember they are appeals to God as a righteous judge.

2. How does Dr. Putnam reconcile praying imprecatory prayers with Christian values like forgiveness and love?

Dr. Putnam acknowledges the difficulty of praying these prayers, especially when personal emotions like vengeance are involved. However, he suggests that because they are part of the canon of Scripture, we shouldn't ignore them. At times, it is appropriate to pray these things because only God can establish the necessary justice. He emphasizes that these prayers are ultimately about trusting in God's judgment and justice, not about seeking personal revenge.

3. What are "foundational metaphors" in the Psalms, and how do they help us understand the text?

Foundational metaphors are underlying, overarching images that shape and give meaning to the more specific metaphors used in the Psalms. For example, the images of God as a rock, fortress, shield, or crag all stem from the foundational metaphor of God as a safe place. Understanding the foundational metaphor helps us to see the connections between various images and grasp the deeper meaning and significance of the text. Instead of seeing individual metaphors in isolation, we see them as branches stemming from a common root.

4. Why does the Bible use metaphors to describe God?

The Bible uses metaphors to describe God because it's difficult to grasp abstract concepts that are outside our senses. We cannot physically touch or see God, so metaphors provide tangible images and relatable experiences that help us understand His nature, character, and relationship with us. Metaphors act as "windows" providing a limited view of the infinite room that God is.

5. How does understanding the original cultural context enhance our understanding of the metaphors in the Psalms?

Understanding the cultural context is crucial because it helps us appreciate what the metaphors would have meant to the original audience. For example, the image of God as a "safe place" would have resonated deeply with people who lived in a time of constant threat from enemies. Knowing that the landscape of the Judean wilderness offered natural crags and fortresses further enriches our understanding of the image of God as a safe place.

6. How can the metaphor of "life as a journey" help us to understand Psalm 1?

In Psalm 1, the image of "life as a journey" explains the three statements in the first verse. The blessed person doesn't start by seeking advice from the wicked, which means they won't move along the path of sinners or end up settling in a place inhabited by scoffers. The Psalm ends with "the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked perishes", reinforcing the idea that life is a journey.

7. In Psalm 1, what is the significance of the image of the righteous person as a "tree planted by streams of water"?

This metaphor highlights the flourishing and stability that come from meditating on God's law (or instruction). The tree is deliberately transplanted to a location that is prepared for it and safe from weather conditions. The deliberate placement of the tree near irrigation shows it is cared for. The fact that it yields fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither illustrates the provision and care provided to the righteous. It also implies that the Lord is a gardener.

8. According to Dr. Putnam, what role does patience play in understanding the Bible, especially poetic texts like the Psalms?

Patience is essential for understanding the Bible, especially poetry. Poetry requires slowing down, thinking, reflecting, and imagining. By taking the time to engage deeply with the text, we can begin to see the connections, beauty, and profound meaning embedded within it. Dr. Putnam recommends writing out the poem, reading it aloud, and drawing connections, emphasizing that the beauty of the text is inseparable from the beauty of its message.